

# Patterns of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

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**W**HETHER OR NOT we welcome the prospect, counterinsurgency operations are in our future. Statebuilding and counterinsurgency are primary tasks for U.S. Armed Forces. As U.S. Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni has noted, “[M]ilitary conflict has changed and we have been reluctant to recognize it. Defeating nation-state forces in conventional battle is not the task for the 21st century. Odd missions to defeat transnational threats or rebuild nations are the order of the day, but we haven’t yet adapted.”<sup>1</sup> For Zinni, statebuilding, peacekeeping, and counterinsurgency are not military operations other than war; they *are* war.

In *The Pentagon’s New Map*, Thomas Barnett argues that to extinguish terrorism we must integrate the entire world into the global economy and thus give everyone a stake in it, which amounts to saying that if the terrorists are on the train they will not want to blow up the tracks.<sup>2</sup> Barnett adds that when incentives fail in a quest for the greater good, we might have to force reluctant regimes to get on board. This would require maneuver forces to execute a coerced regime change, followed by statebuilding to create stability and security in the face of some level of insurgency.

As we anticipate future insurgencies, we gain by examining past examples. Enter the military historian. The past does not supply us with rules, but it does alert us to important issues and dynamics. The past can never substitute for knowledge of the current challenge, but it can help us interpret that challenge.

## Basic Model of Insurgency/Counterinsurgency

The historical model of insurgency and counterinsurgency present in this article is an attempt to make sense of insurgent warfare during the second half of the 20th century to understand

threats arising in the 21st. During the Cold War, an insurgency’s “home” was usually a country, but an insurgency could also arise within a subdivision of a country. By contrast, an insurgency today is more likely to cross borders, particularly those drawn without respect to ethnic, cultural, or religious realities. The model represents home as a box defined by geographic, ethnic, economic, social, cultural, and religious characteristics. Inside the box are governments, counterinsurgent forces, insurgent leaders, insurgent forces, and the general population, which is made up of three groups: those committed to the insurgents, those committed to the counterinsurgents, and those who simply wish to get on with their lives. Often, but not always, states or groups that aid one side or the other are outside the box. Outside-the-box intervention has dynamics of its own.

In past anticolonial, nationalist, and Marxist “wars of liberation,” the ruling government and its insurgent adversaries fought over the crucial, complex issue of legitimacy; that is, which government is thought to be the rightful authority. Governments claim legitimacy based on history, ideology, culture, economics, force—and, at times, political representation. Before the decline of the Soviet Union, Marxist, nationalist, or in the case of Afghanistan, religious ideology buttressed the insurgency’s claims to legitimacy, but specific grievances against the ruling regime usually supplied the most compelling arguments for the claim to legitimacy. In any struggle for allegiances, the ruling regime might not be able to co-opt the insurgency’s ideology, but it might be able to challenge its claims to legitimacy by addressing and resolving grievances.

However, while instituting reform implies well-meaning progress, reform was, and is, a two-edged sword. When a relatively secure government

inaugurates timely reform, it proves its good will and adds to its legitimacy, but hastily improvised reform can be read as evidence of weakness, a last-ditch effort to hold on to power. When an outside power dictates reform, as in Vietnam, reform is often seen as subservience to an alien force and alien principles. Reform to change the box and eliminate grievances does not automatically erode support for an insurgency; it depends on the circumstances. Moreover, reform does not simply take place inside the box; it changes the box itself, often with unknown consequences.

Historically, the critical test of legitimacy is the ability of one side or the other to guarantee the security of the population. To understand this, we must consider the nature of popular support. Those who rely on the government defend its claims of legitimacy. They might have more high-minded reasons for supporting the ruling regime, or they might simply benefit from the status quo in a purely material sense, as a wealthy class of landowners, for example.

On the other end of the spectrum are those strongly committed to the insurgents. This segment of the population denies the legitimacy of the government and accepts that of the insurgents. An insurgency's existence implies a base of popular support that actively aids or at least tolerates the insurgents. Mao Tse-tung spoke of guerrillas as fish in the sea, a metaphor that suggests a great sea of support exists and that fish cannot survive outside it.

The necessity for a base of support always shapes the actions of both insurgents and counterinsurgents. Between the committed segments of the population lies the majority, which is essentially neutral in the partisan struggle. The contesting party—whether government or rebel—that best guarantees security wins the majority's support, however grudging. Here the government's task is more difficult than the insurgents'. The government must demonstrate that it can fight the insurgents effectively while also protecting the population. Insurgents only have to demonstrate they can best protect a population or, far easier, inflict enough mayhem and destruction

to demonstrate that the existing authorities cannot. Insurgents can exert leverage by convincing a population that peace will return only if the insurgents gain what they demand. Insurgents can be effective by destruction, and it is always easier to destroy than to create. It requires the genius of a Leonardo DaVinci to paint a portrait of Mona Lisa, but it only takes the malevolence of a maniac with a boxcutter to rip it to shreds.

Violence is central to war. Insurgents attack government institutions and personnel, counterinsurgent troops, and the progovernment population. Government institutions under attack include administrative offices and agents as well as economic and political infrastructure. Counterinsurgents respond by attacking insurgent leaders (perhaps already formed into a shadow government), insurgent forces, and their committed supporters. But while violence is central, we must make an important distinction between the kinds of violence involved.

In his classic *War in the Shadows*, Robert Asprey differentiates between what he calls quantitative violence and qualitative violence.<sup>3</sup> Quantitative violence is essentially indiscriminate. We can measure it in quantitative terms, for example, by the number of rounds fired, tons of bombs dropped, or bodies counted. By contrast, qualitative violence discriminates; it targets only particular victims in

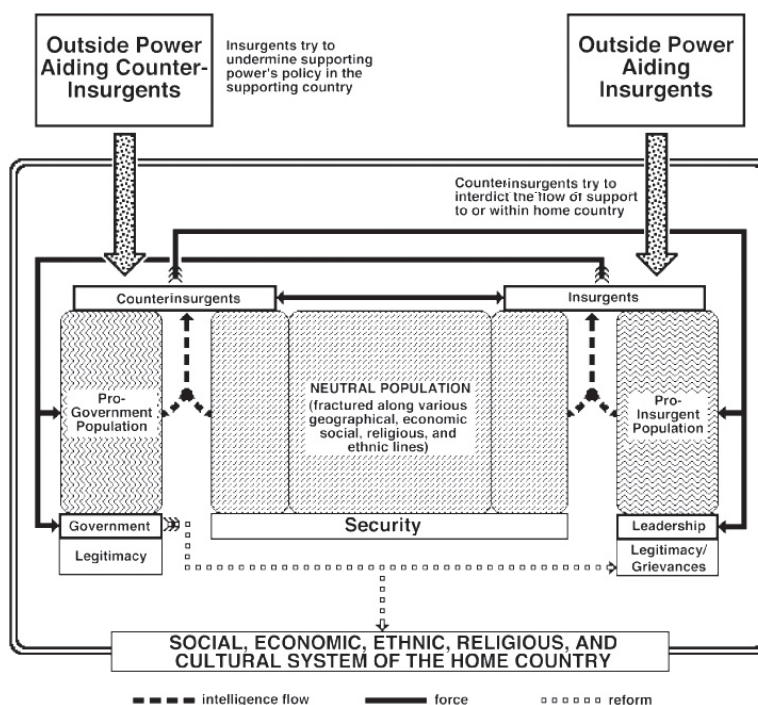


Figure 1. Basic pattern of insurgency and counterinsurgency.

such a way as to minimize collateral damage while maximizing political effect. In conventional war, troops taking fire from a village would be likely to call in an air strike, but insurgents faced with the same situation would be more apt to target village leaders and kill them, but in such a way as to leave a lasting impression of terror. To put it bluntly, in quantitative violence, how many you kill matters; in qualitative violence, who you kill matters.

Quantitative violence is appropriate against insurgents organized and equipped for conventional war. But, more often, counterinsurgency works best when it identifies an enemy and concentrates only on him. The use of violence leaves a deadly residue. Those who are harmed or whose family and friends have been victimized do not embrace the perpetrators of violence but harbor hatred and seek retribution against them. Killing large numbers of insurgents might not weaken the enemy but simply gain him new adherents.

Insurgents and counterinsurgents vie for the allegiance of a people, but an intervening power does well simply to gain willing compliance with its policy. To speak of winning hearts and minds is probably misleading. The words seem to place kindness and ideology first, but acts of kindness are not a particularly good fit for vigilant armed warriors. Winning people over to new beliefs is at best a long process and a notably difficult task for outside forces coming from different cultures and speaking different languages. But if the model here is correct, providing security goes a long way toward earning allegiance and compliance.

The use of force can provide security, but only when applied with care. Counterinsurgents have to pursue, capture, or kill the bad guys, but poorly conceived attacks that victimize a neutral population undermine security. Restraint—not hurting the wrong people—is the key to success, but restraint is inimical to the warrior spirit. A better word is “focus” (violence aimed at the proper target and striking only it), using sniper fire, for example, not an artillery barrage. Ruthlessness against a known foe must not be indiscriminate or misdirected, and focused ruthlessness requires bravery. In reserving violence for known adversaries, one becomes vulnerable to enemies who hide in the crowd. The mission to defeat the insurgency has to come before the desire to protect oneself against any possible threat.

Telling friend from foe requires good intelligence. Insurgents depend on information furnished by their own activities, by the proinsurgent popula-

tion, and by that portion of the neutral population under their influence. Conversely, counterinsurgents depend on intelligence from their own efforts, from the progovernment segment of the population, and from those who believe their security is best served by the counterinsurgents. Intelligence has always been indispensable to successful counterinsurgency operations, and it has always been far easier for insurgents to spot government agents than for counterinsurgents to locate insurgents immersed in the sea of the population.

While not all acts of terrorism qualify as acts of war, terrorism, like war, is violence intended to achieve a political result. Insurgents often employ terrorist tactics as a form of discriminate violence. In fact, the difference between insurgency and terrorism is not so much in the character of the violence used as in its frequency and scale. Terrorists typically work in small cells, or even alone. Guerrillas, being more numerous and enjoying wider support, strike with greater frequency and employ a wider range of tactics than do terrorists. Mao spoke of three phases of an armed struggle: guerrilla war; the coordination of guerrilla and limited main force units in a more intense struggle; and ultimately, conventional warfare. To these we might add a fourth—terrorism—when it is the initial phase of an armed struggle prior to having enough support to mount a guerrilla war.<sup>4</sup>

During the Cold War, outside powers complicated the dynamics of insurgency because outside supporters viewed such conflicts as limited war in Clausewitzian terms.<sup>5</sup> Although victory promised advantages, defeat did not threaten the existence of the outside state; this was not a struggle for survival, even if the war was total, unlimited, and winner-take-all for the adversaries inside the box. Insurgency is a form of asymmetrical warfare not only because opposing sides use different levels of weapons and tactics, but also because they have different levels of commitment.

In the second half of the 20th century, the most effective way to neutralize outside support to counterinsurgents was to turn sentiment in the outside country against the intervention. Support declines when the penalties for withdrawal seem remote and few and the war's expense and loss of life are evident. Many of those who protested the Vietnam War were moved by conscience, but the United States withdrew from Vietnam because of the cost, not the cause. At a certain point, continuing the fight was just not worth it. The same could be said for Soviet withdrawal from the Afghan Civil War.

Outside aid to insurgents is a different matter because those who aid insurgents usually have preferred to send weapons, supplies, money, and other forms of support, rather than to put boots on the ground. In fact, should large foreign forces go into another country to attack its ruling government, that would be an invasion, not an insurgency. It is true that North Vietnam dispatched regular forces to fight in the South in an invasion of sorts, but North Vietnam believed it was fighting a civil war. The critical fact is that the Soviets and the Chinese did not dispatch large numbers of troops. Because outside aid for insurgents is primarily material support, the best way to stop it is by interdicting the flow of equipment, not undermining popular support within the outside power. This fight is more physical than political.

## Successful Insurgency

A Cold War insurgency was proof of strong sentiment in opposition to an existing government. Grievances that fueled resistance were widely perceived to be real. Ruling regimes were incapable of alleviating grievances for political, economic, social, or cultural reasons. For example, if economic inequity was the issue, those who held wealth and land supported the government precisely because it maintained their dominance; the government could offer little to the poor and landless without eroding its most important power base. Counterinsurgents faced an uphill battle in defense of a regime with little legitimacy.

If supported by only a small segment of the population, the government and its counterinsurgent forces could be trapped in a self-defeating cycle, a kind of death spiral. To act effectively required intelligence; but the smaller population base cooperating with the government provided only limited intelligence. Lacking intelligence, the government cannot focus its attacks; it conducted large-scale operations, such as sweeps and search-and-destroy missions that were most likely to inflict violence on the general population. As a result, the government eroded the security of its own people and, consequently, its own legitimacy.

When the government acted like an enemy of the population,

the population refused to aid the government by furnishing intelligence. Clumsy government assaults against insurgents thus become attacks on its intelligence flow. As a result, the government became even more blind and dependent on the wrong kind of counterinsurgent operations and resorted to illegal actions contrary to its laws and its own people's concept of justice. Arrest without clear cause, imprisonment without trial, torture, and summary executions could produce short-term results, but undermine the government's legitimacy and eventually lead to defeat. For example, French counterinsurgency forces used harsh methods in Algeria, which might have helped in Algeria but eroded support for the war in France. The counterinsurgency most often touted as a success—the defeat of Marxist insurgents in Malaya—adopted as a principle that the government should refrain from disobeying its own laws.

Although brutally repressive dictatorships use terror and torture against their own people and survive by doing so, the United States cannot afford to use such tactics. It is given that whatever U.S. forces do will be subjected to intense media scrutiny: secrets are nearly impossible to keep. Morality should guide us, but even if the cynical might cast it aside, realists would still have to admit that if the United States were to support horribly oppressive regimes, doing so would undercut public support of U.S. foreign policy. During the

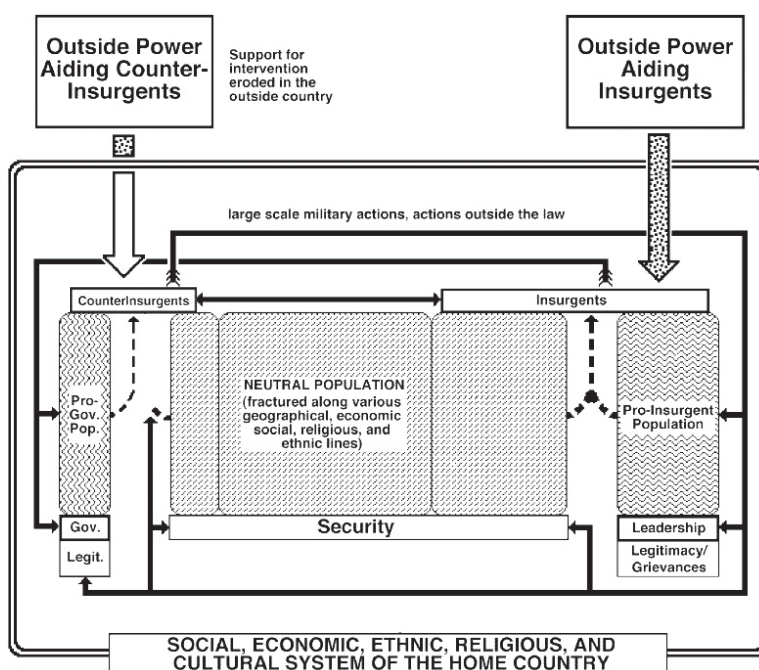


Figure 2. A model of successful insurgency.



Cold War, many were willing to overlook our allies' tactics, but even then there were limits. The photograph of a Saigon police official rendering street justice by shooting a suspected Viet Cong in the head became a symbol for war resisters in the United States.

During Cold War insurgencies, support faltered when an outside power's population became sympathetic to the insurgent cause or, more commonly, became alarmed by the high costs of counterinsurgency. Algerians won their independence by outlasting French resolve to compel them to remain within the French orbit. A decade later, Americans turned against involvement in Vietnam in revulsion over mounting casualties in what seemed like an endless war.

The departure of an outside power weakened counterinsurgents by removing forces and material aid. It also gave insurgents momentum, and in war, momentum is worth battalions.

## Successful Counterinsurgency

Haunted by failure in Vietnam, Americans often forget that successful counterinsurgencies have occurred, such as the Filipino victory over the Huks (1946-1954) and British success in Malaya (1948-1957). Some say U.S. support of the counterinsurgency in El Salvador during the 1980s was also a victory, but that is debatable. Insurgents might have been held off, but only by providing massive aid to a small, oppressive elite. Those who point to the "Salvador option" as worth following tend to take a cynical view of counterinsurgency.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it is possible to learn lessons from failed efforts, including U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Ideally, a successful counterinsurgent effort is based not only on effective military action but on real reform by a government that has its people's loyalty. Such reform can alleviate grievances that gave the insurgency legitimacy in the eyes of its supporters, and increased popular support brings increased intelligence, which makes it easier to conduct focused actions against insurgents. This was the case when government forces fighting the Huks increased popular support by increasing the security of the population and conducting coun-

terinsurgency operations in a way that minimized casualties among noncombatants. In both the Filipino and Malayan cases, police and small military unit operations were the rule, not large sledgehammer operations. Military forces learned to act in a way that did not convey the impression that they regarded the general population as enemies. A population that increasingly saw counterinsurgents as providing security was increasingly likely to support them and provide them with vital intelligence.

Focused violence by small numbers of counterinsurgents produced greater rewards with less residue. However, it is debatable whether such a principle justified the use of "murder squads" as in the Phoenix program in Vietnam or in El Salvador. Certainly, an insurgency's leaders are legitimate targets, but for such a policy to be effective, intelligence must be accurate. Sometimes those who identify individuals for attack are simply settling personal scores. In El Salvador, assassination was used to quell legitimate voices of reform, not simply to decapitate the insurgents. In such a case, "focused" action became evidence of authoritarian dictatorship and corruption. And deeper questions existed as well. In a struggle for legitimacy founded on justice, can a government execute its opponents without trial? That was what assassination of insurgent leaders amounted to in El Salvador and Vietnam.

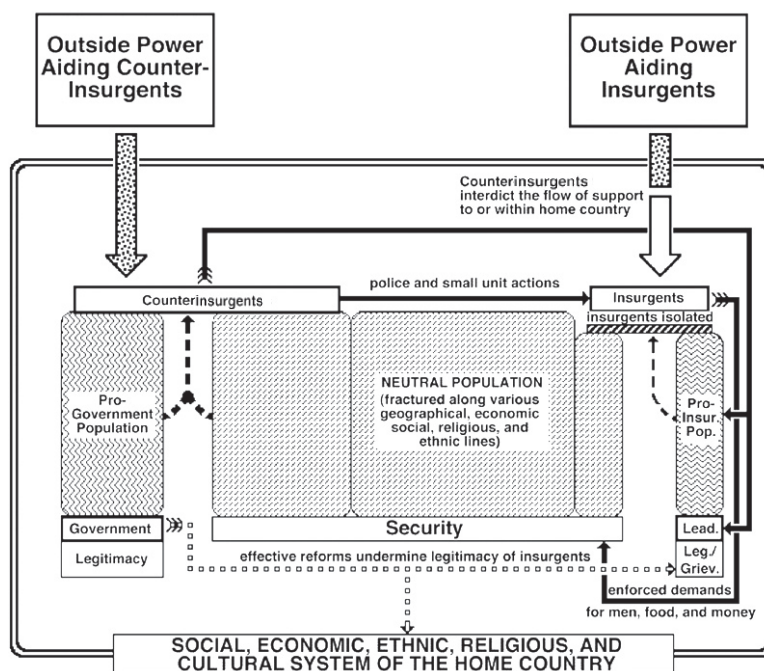


Figure 3. A model of successful counterinsurgency.

Without undermining their legitimacy, the British effectively weakened the insurgents in Malaya by isolating them from their supporters. This was possible because supporters could be identified as a specific minority—ethnic Chinese working at the plantations. By relocating this population into fortified settlements, the British locked the pro-insurgent population in and the insurgents out; that is, they deprived the fish of the sea. The isolation achieved in Malaya was literal and physical, but in a more figurative sense, counterinsurgents must be able to isolate insurgents from their support base to achieve victory.

For a counterinsurgency to succeed, the majority of the population must eventually come to see insurgents as outsiders, as outlaws. The sea must dry up. When this happened during the Cold War insurgents in decline adopted tactics that only caused the population to resent them. Insurgents became a source of insecurity, not hope. Insurgents needed money, food, and recruits, and if they did not secure them from willing supporters, they extorted them from the unwilling. They changed from noble to ignoble robbers.

## Lessons Learned

What does a historical model based on Cold War experience teach about the struggle in Iraq? Success cannot be achieved without providing the general population with security. Intelligence remains the key resource to fight effectively because military action must be focused to spare noncombatant casualties and unnecessary destruction. Popular support within the United States is our most vulnerable center of gravity. Yet several important factors are different. Insurrection occurred in Iraq only after a conventional campaign took down Saddam Hussein's regime. It did not begin as an attack against an indigenous regime; it has been directed toward U.S. forces and those Iraqis

working with them. Whereas major outside states intervened on the part of insurgents during the Cold War, in today's era of globalized economies and globalized insurgency, assistance comes from nonstate actors—individuals and radical Islamic groups eager to attack what they see as the anti-Islamic United States. Superpower rivalries and Marxist ideology played roles before, but now insurgents speak in terms of religion and ethnicity. Such concerns seem more immutable, but one can still hope for the victory of ballots over bullets. Only time will tell.

American troops must concentrate on state-formation and peacemaking, which require different tactics than conventional operations and a different psychology than the warrior ethos. To succeed, the United States must gain the support, or at least the compliance, of the majority of Iraq's population, but this will mean U.S. troops have to accept risks. Sending patrols out into the streets is a great deal more dangerous than bombing from 10,000 feet up.

The most short-sighted statements I hear are: "They only understand force." Or, "If only we could take the gloves off, we could win." The truth is that everyone understands force, and everyone can be battered or intimidated by violence, but such use of violence generates the three "Rs": resentment, resistance, and revenge. People who argue that the enemy only understands force imply that force wins respect. In reality, force usually only instills fear. We are not trying to recreate Saddam's regime of fear, so we must use more than force.

The wisest analysis of the counterinsurgency in Iraq came from an unidentified colonel on CNN who stated that we cannot really win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis but we can provide security and establish trust. In security lies the support of the majority and the environment in which a new and better state may emerge. **MR**

## NOTES

1. Tom Clancy, with GEN Anthony Zinni, U.S. Marine Corps, Retired, and Tony Koltz, *Battle Ready* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 2004), 424.

2. Thomas P.M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 2004).

3. Robert Asprey, *War in the Shadows* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975).

4. See the analysis of terrorism in John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, rev. and exp. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), epilogue.

5. See my consideration of this dynamic in "War of Annihilation, War of Attrition, and War of Legitimacy: A Neo-Clausewitzian Approach to Twentieth-Century Conflicts," *Marine Corps Gazette* 80, 10 (October 1996).

6. Those enthused about the El Salvador option might read Mario Lunga Uclés, *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) for a sobering and explicitly Marxist view.

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